

# **RROMA, ASHKALI, EGYPTIANS**

A Kosovo Peculiarity?

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***Abstract:** Who, in the last few days, months or years, has not heard of the dearth of names associated to a seemingly simple concept, namely that of a Gypsy, or rather, in the Kosovar terminology, a madzhup. This essay is devoted to these "differences" as well as to the appellations and their origins. It is far from a scientific work, as it represent but a view based on an experience wider than Kosovo itself, for this problem is not limited to that region alone. It is thus the sketch of an explanation as well as a base for further discussions.*

## **I. HISTORICAL AND SOCIO ETHNOLOGICAL BACKGROUND**

Historically, Rroma, in whichever name they appear are a homogenous ethno-cultural entity. This statement in itself may seem rather far from the realm of reality, especially in view of the so-called "differences" or distinctions that Rroma themselves - alas - do further but is nevertheless based in historical reality.

Rroma, and I do stress here that I am using this term in a wide sense, that is to encompass almost all the groups that pass under Gypsies among the general population, have always come under several appellations and names. First, and this should not be neglected in the discussion of the peculiar current Kosovo situation, Rroma call themselves by various names. For Rroma come in various groups. Each group represents a historical and originally rather localised entity. Its identity stems from a common historical background as well as from common traits, usually, and originally trades.

So one finds Sinti, Xaladitka, Cale, Servi, Arlii, Gurbeti etc., each with a distinct identity, but nevertheless with a common culture. This statement, especially when one thinks of Sinti - who distinguish themselves from Rroma - may seem "heretical". Nevertheless, should one ask a Sinto what language he or she speaks, the answer is invariably "Rromanes", that is the Rroma language. And this is more than just a name, for their "next" relatives, namely Rroma from Poland who fled the German persecutions in the XVIIth century, still speak a very similar - and totally understandable - dialect but they pass for Rroma.

So language is one of the basis of the identity. It is but one, as traditions, trades do form another facet of the identity. While most of these traditions are common to all, it is in minor details that a

group identity formed itself. It is more the "horse-dealers" versus the "blacksmiths" versus the "coppersmiths" than fundamental differences among the Roma themselves. All in all, and this needs to be stressed more than once, Roma, in spite of several hundreds of years of a distinct history - think of the Sinti versus the Balkan Roma - still are a culturally homogenous population.

One may think that the Roma identity and culture is uniquely defined by the ability and the perpetuation of the language - Rromanes. While this is true to some extent, this is nevertheless, far from true. It is the traditions and their respect which, to a large extent define the Roma identity. And these are not language bound as the example of the Spanish Cale easily shows. Their dialect disappeared in the XIXth century, but to this day, they are amongst the most traditional Roma. So, especially in cases where a group does not speak Rromanes, there are enough other common elements to define one's identity.

## **II. RROMA POLITICS**

So why this wealth of different names, this seemingly existing competition? There are two factors at play. The first one is a purely Roma one, and I will shortly describe both its origins and source. The second, and by far the more important is politics. And not Roma politics, but rather the use of non-Roma of these small differences to achieve another aim.

On the Roma side, well, Roma show their first allegiance for their family, then to their lineage and finally to Roma at large. This, taken together with the group names and appurtenance can lead to misleading statements that confuse the layman. Let me give but two examples: A Kalderash - very traditional coppersmiths found the world over - told us once that his father settled in Kosovo after World War Two because there were no Roma there. He by far did not mean that there were no Gypsies - Roma - there, just simply that there were none from his group, the Kalderasha. To give a second example, a Sinto told me that in Poland, there were Roma and Sinti. Well, by Roma he meant the Kalderasha that I just cited earlier and by Sinti, he meant the Polish Roma - who call themselves Polska Roma. Hence, and I do stress here that these are just two typical examples of a general phenomenon, one should show some caution while judging some statements.

While these examples show how the Roma themselves can confuse the layman, by far the most important factor is the use that non-Roma have made of these minor "differences". Kosovo, and in fact all of former Yugoslavia provides perhaps one of the best examples of the use that politicians and political parties made of these facts. In Kosovo, one finds, according to the "common knowledge", Roma, Ashkali and Egyptians. Well, this is true should one listen to their political mouths. Reality, as usual is more differentiated. In fact, there are Gurbeti, Arlii,

Bugurdzhi and various other groups and further subdivisions in that region. How can I claim this? Well, it is rather easy. Some of the "Roma" are in fact - right across the border, claiming they are Gurbeti; others are Arlii while yet others are Bugurdzhi. Family ties, language, all underlines these facts. So what of the Egyptians and the Ashkali?

Especially in the Balkans, many Roma integrated themselves in society to the extent where part of their identity - in this case the language - was lost. It may seem odd to the Western reader that Roma are sedentary, are doctors, lawyers, even policemen, but this is attested by Ottoman tax register as early as the XVth century. This is not to say that all of these sedentary Roma - by and large the bulk of the Roma population (around 95%) - just assimilated. No, for most kept their language, traditions and identity. Just some lost one of those "legs", namely their language. In the case of Ashkali in Kosovo, it does neither prevent them from marrying Roma - and vice versa - nor from keeping their identity and traditions.

So what of the Egyptians? Egyptians are an old myth among non-Roma. After all, the first Roma who arrived in the early XVth century in Western Europe all claimed to be dukes, counts of even kings from "Little Egypt" - and hence their names of Gypsies, Gitanos of the Greek Guftoi, all derived from the Egyptian name. This myth can be traced back to Modon, where a hill near this Western Greek town was called Gyppe, from Egypt, and was settled by Roma. Maybe, these Roma Egyptians differ from the actual Egyptians found in Kosovo and Macedonia. However, the region was always known for its Roma settlements but never ever for "true" Egyptians who could have settled there under Ottoman domination. In fact, even the armies that the Ottomans used in the European part of their empire were mostly local or at least Western when not of Turkish stock. Add to this that Arabic was never spoken in the Balkan and that the appearance of these Egyptians occurs shortly after the visit of Nasser to Yugoslavia in the late 1950's. To give but a parallel, the visit of Indira Gandhi to that very same country sparked a move of Roma "leader" to denote themselves as an Indian minority.

### **III. STATE POLICIES - "DIVIDE AND CONQUER"**

So, if the "differences" are rather in the form more than in the flesh, what are the causes of these strong positions - namely the "they are not", "we are not to be mistaken with them" etc. Think for a second about the Kosovo situation. Reading the press, and this since eons, one reads that there is a majority of Albanians and a minority of Serbs. This Serbian minority is - or rather now was - by far the largest one in the country.

Serbs claimed Kosovo as their for historical reasons. This, mostly since they lost the battle of the fields of Kosovo against the Turks and thus lost their independence but also because of all the Orthodox churches in the region - quite a few of which can be dated from the re-conquest by the

Byzantine Empire who took the territory back from the Serbs in the early years of the XIth century. On the other hand, the Albanians claimed Kosovo as their, by reason of their majority in the region as well as for some rather dubious historical reasons - after all, the link between Albanians and Epiria is rather tenuous at least.

What does this have to do with Rroma? Simple, if you think about it for a second. They, as in many countries proved to be a "thorn" in those theories and conflicting claims. This needs to be explained in some more details so let us start with the Serbian side:

Claiming to be the "largest minority" in Kosovo, the presence of "too many" Rroma was a disturbing factor. Especially if one thinks that the Rroma most probably arrived in the region around the same time as the Serbs. Not only is this idea threatening the tenuous historical claim on that region, it also destroys the balance and "special" status of the Serbs in that region. Hence, instead of Rroma, the simple idea of "more is beautiful" or rather "divide and conquer". If you cannot reduce numbers - unless you ethnically cleanse a country something frowned upon nowadays - divide. Let us do some basic arithmetic: Last census in Kosovo stated around 125 thousands Rroma in the region, by far less than the ca. 200 thousands Serbs. On the other hand, most of the Rroma, if not the majority, declared themselves as Albanians in that very same census, as they were oppressed by the Serbs and under nationalistic Albanian pressure to do so. At the Rambouillet meetings, prior to the Nato intervention, one suddenly finds 150'000 Rroma and 150'000 Ashkali. Still, each separately less than the Serb minority in the region. Throw in a "few" Egyptians for good measure and one arrives at a rather reasonable total of around 400'000 Rroma - in a general sense in that region. A number, one should stress that is consistent with the Ottoman tax registers, which, after all were kept up to date till the creation of Serbia. So, suddenly, the Serbs are only the second largest minority in Kosovo. What is thus the policy of the Serbian regime? Deny this, and organise it so that they are "divided" into separate entities. Needless to say, all of these Rroma and Ashkali and Egyptians remained and are madzhup - Gypsies in the eyes of the Albanians. Just, it was rather convenient to the Serbs to see a political affirmation and with it a delimitation between various Rroma groups, that, after all freely inter marry.

So what is the Albanian rationale in this case. After all, all of these Rroma are madzhup - regardless as to whether they call themselves Rroma, Gurbeti, Arlii, Ashkali or by any other name. Well, their first rationale was exactly opposed to the Serbian one. Pressure, and this is documented was exerted on Rroma to declare themselves as Albanians in the last census so as to increase the Albanian "majority". This was made easier in that that most Rroma already sympathised with the Albanian cause - being repressed and discriminated by the Serbs and being of a dual culture. So the Albanians "played" the Rroma as Albanians. Well, some will say, now they are expulsing them. But this places them in a quandary. Elections are due sometime soon in

Kosovo. And Roma, besides Serbs and other minorities have been expelled. Also the Roma that bravely sided with Albanians up till after the Nato intervention. So suddenly, there will be quite a few "Albanians" missing, suddenly Roma. Hence, the quandary, namely, what happened to them? Either they left, or, rather more to the point, the numbers provided by Albanians were rather dubious in the first place.

Hence the desire if not activities to declare some Roma groups as "Albanians" - at least until the elections, even if one then needs to use the denomination of "second class Albanians" that some so-called leaders use.

#### **IV. REALITY VS. MYTHS**

So, if the politics and policies have led to a tethering split within the Roma community, what of life? As usual, reality is more differentiated than the "facts" and "assertions" one can hear from various leaders and so-called self-proclaimed experts. Inter-marriages abound, as we have said, Romanes has been lost or retained on either side of the divide - as can be seen for example in the case of an "Ashkali - President" issuing certificates to gullible Roma trying to avoid being repatriated to Kosovo and who speaks a fluent Romanes. Perhaps only truly among some Egyptians did a separate identity emerge in the last few decades. As among Ashkali, this identity is still rather shallow and in spite of various theories of a different origin of these groups, a leitmotif, doubts are cast by such statement - seen on one of these "certificates" stating for example that some of the ancestors of such or such a group had been Moslems since the third century.

This is not to belittle the phenomenon as it is just a reflection of what has happened all over the world and resulted in the various Roma groups. Only, the situation in Kosovo is special inasmuch as external play has been involved in the "creation" of those new identities. A fact that is underlined by the alignment of various "leaders" either on Serbian, Albanian or simply for their people.

As a conclusion, I would like to stress that I sincerely hope that governments and governmental agencies all over the world will not use this "split" within the Gypsy community to further their ends. It would be outright play into the hands of those who fed the fire and used Roma to their ends, be they the Serbs or the Albanians.